

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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The role of the psychiatrist is a most ingenious one. First of all, he makes the patient comfortable and horizontal. Should the patient doze, the psychiatrist nudges him awake and keeps him talking. This regimen gets the patient's mind off his troubles. And aside from a tic or two or a compulsion or so, the patient is soon as good as new.



THE WOMEN BEHIND THE GUN

by Steve O'Donnell

HIS SMALL white teeth showed and he repeated himself again. "I kill for money and pleasure. Aren't you going to write that down, doctor?"

I made a notation on the pad of paper.

He waited until I looked up. "You still don't believe me?" His smile got broader. "I thought you'd understand by now."

He was a delicate, thin-shouldered young man and there was a faintly discernible bulge under his breast pocket.

My pen was a bit slippery in my fingers. "Tell me what comes to your mind."

He regarded me for a moment and then brought out a silver cigarette case. "Try my brand, doctor. It's soothing to the nerves."

He lit our cigarettes. "May I regard you as a friend?"

"Of course."

He glanced at the two-drawer filing cabinet and the couch against

the wall. "This is my third visit. I hope I haven't bored you?"

"Not at all."

His laugh was shrill. "Of course I have. To some extent anyway. A mere recital of insignificant childhood events. But I assure you that you will not find this session boring, whatever else you may think of it."

The cigarette seemed large in his frail hands. "I discovered that killing is really such a simple thing. Just one revolver shot and the job is done."

His light blue eyes watched me. "Murder has proved to be the answer to my financial problems. I come from a good family, doctor, and I have had the best education, but that has been all that my mother could offer me."

He adjusted the crease in his trousers. "I've killed eleven people in the last six years and I've made it a practice to know them to some degree before they died."

I waited.

"I enjoyed talking to them. Watching them and waiting for the expression on their faces when they knew they were going to die."

I exhaled cigarette smoke and picked up my pen again. "How much were you paid?"

The smile returned. "It all depended on the victim chosen and the customer's ability to pay. Anywhere from five to fifteen thousand."

"I see." I rubbed dampness from my palm. "Once your victims learned that you were going to kill them, did they ever try to buy you off?"

He giggled. "Lord, yes. I've been offered five times as much as I was hired for, but I've never succumbed to the temptation. I'm a man of honor."

I looked at my notes. "Yes. A man of honor."

He glanced at his watch. "It's four-thirty. You quit at five, don't you?"

"Yes."

His mouth twitched with suppressed mirth. "I'll remember that, doctor."

I shifted in my chair. "Your victims? Were they men or women?"

He thought about it. "Men and women."

"And the people who hired you?"

"They were all women." He amplified. "I met them in my social circle. At parties and such."

"Of course. Little receptions, teas, and the like." I looked down at my pad. "You have difficulty in getting along with men?"

"Certainly not," he snapped. "It's just that . . . that I meet women more often."

"Tell me," I said. "Do you sleep well nights?"

The smile came back. "You mean does my conscience bother me? Not the slightest, doctor. My victims never return to haunt me."

"I wasn't referring to them specifically," I said. "I meant other nightmares. Things that make you scream in your sleep and wake up in terror of the dark."

His face became expressionless. "I never dream. Never at all."

I made a few marks with my pen. "You were the youngest child in your family. There were three older sisters?"

"Yes."

"It must have been difficult."

His eyes flickered. "Why should it have been difficult?"

I shrugged. "I don't imagine that being constantly dominated by your mother and three older sisters was enjoyable."

Bright spots came to his cheeks. "I never said anything like that. If there ever was any domination, I've thrown that off. I have my own apartment. I can drink and smoke when I want to. I don't have to account to anybody."

I leaned forward. "May I try another one of your cigarettes?"

He was faintly surprised. "Of course."

I selected one and lit it. "These are really quite good."

He was flattered. "I have them made especially for me." He frowned with slight worry. "You don't think they're too mild?"

"No," I said. "Distinctly masculine." I puffed the cigarette. "You mentioned that your father died when you were quite young. Just what do you remember about him?"

His face became thoughtful. "Not too much, actually. Just that he was kind and patient. I could always go to him when there was trouble with . . ." He stopped and shrugged.

I watched some of my cigarette smoke dissolve. "If he were alive would he be about my age?"

He looked at me for a moment. "I suppose so."

I tapped ash into a tray. "Did you ever forget your mother's birthday?"

"Yes. Just once and . . ."

"There was a scene? Did she say that you were unloving? Ungrateful? Selfish and inconsiderate?"

He said nothing, but a faint line of sweat glistened on his forehead.

"And your sisters? You never forget their birthdays? Anniversaries?"

Something came into his eyes. "One of my sisters is dead."

I waited.

He licked his lips. "It was an accident."

I let a few seconds pass. "She was your first victim?"

His voice went high. "Don't use that word! I don't count Doris at all." He patted his forehead with a white silk handkerchief. "I didn't mean to kill her. But we were alone in the house and she kept nagging and nagging . . ."

The side of his mouth twitched. "I was only seventeen when it happened. She'd been giving me orders about this and that all day long and finally I couldn't stand it any more."

"Did you have trouble with the police?"

"No. They believed me. I said I'd been cleaning the gun when it accidentally discharged." A gleam came into his eyes and he almost whispered. "It was so easy to get away with."

The room seemed stuffy. "It seems strange that there would be a gun in such a household as yours."

His fingertips absently touched the bulge in his jacket. "I bought it and hid it in the attic. At first I was deathly afraid of it, but then I learned to hold it and it became almost like a friend. My only friend. It was so cool and efficient and could solve so many problems."

He stopped himself and glanced at his watch. "It's almost five."

"Your watch is a little fast," I said. "We still have time."

He smiled. "Doctor, don't you realize why I'm here?"

I frowned at my notes. "You mentioned that your sisters had similar voices. Strident? Demanding?"

He nodded impatiently. "Yes. Yes, I probably did."

"And your mother too?"

He hesitated. "I suppose so."

"And you still take orders from all of them?"

He shook his head vigorously. "I'm completely free of them. I told you that."

"Yes," I said. "But you visit them regularly, don't you? They get very angry if you don't?"

His temper was close to the surface, but he pulled himself together. "I'll have to make things a bit more plain, doctor. I haven't come here as a patient."

A thought seemed to come to him. "Do your patients ever try to get you to talk about yourself?"

"Yes. Usually."

He smiled with a trace of coyness. "Suppose I already know quite a lot about you, doctor. Suppose I've actually been to your house? Seen your wife and consented to do a favor for her?"

"This sister of yours," I said quickly. "Doris. When she told you to do something, you did it. Her voice demanded it."

His eyes went to the window and he frowned. "My watch isn't slow. Not according to that church tower clock." His hand slipped inside his jacket pocket.

I got up, turned my back to

him, and stared out of the window. "The time's passed so swiftly I barely noticed it." I decided to use his first name. "This has all been extremely interesting, Don."

I could feel his interest. "Really?"

I sighed. "So many people who come to me are boring. Absolutely boring. You were quite the opposite, Don."

I kept my back to him. "I realized, of course, that you had no legitimate reason for coming to me. It's obvious that you are well-adjusted, mature, and intelligent."

I thought I could turn around now.

His hand was back on his knee and he was waiting for more words he'd never heard before.

I smiled broadly. "Perhaps you were testing my professional ability. This was a lark of some kind."

He liked that particular word. "Yes. You might call it that. A lark."

"You carried it off perfectly, Don. I'd like to hear more about it." I glanced at my watch. "Perhaps over dinner." I allowed my face to become thoughtful. "I wonder if my wife is home?"

His smile was smug. "As a matter of fact I know where she is at this moment. She's at a cocktail party surrounded by dozens of people." The smile became wider. "I'm sure they could all testify to her presence, if necessary."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully and smiled.

"The two of you concocted this little joke together?"

He giggled. "Yes. You could say that. A charming woman, your wife."

I spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "Yes. She does give that first impression."

His face showed puzzlement.

"I suppose you noticed her voice?" I asked. "A discerning man like you would."

He seemed doubtful.

"The underlying stridency, of course," I said. "The sharpness beneath that studied modulation. Surely you must have?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I believe . . . now that you mention it."

"Yes," I said. "And no doubt she told you some fantastic story about me. She often does that you know. What did she tell you about me, Don? That I'm an ex-bank robber? Or that I go out with other women? Or that I was a slave trader?"

He shook his head and laughed slightly. "No. Nothing so fantastic."

"Go ahead, Don. Tell me what she said. Perhaps I haven't heard the story before."

He overcame a reluctance. "Well, she simply said that you refused to give her a divorce without a settlement of over a million dollars."

I laughed. "A million dollars? Why, the poor woman hasn't a cent to her name. And as for a divorce, the facts are just the opposite. I've

been pleading with her for years to let me free."

He blinked. "She's a Trent. They have millions."

I laughed again. "Perhaps some of the branches of the Trent family have, but my wife's dowry was ten thousand dollars worth of debts."

He stuttered slightly. "But that tremendous house? Those acres of grounds?"

I shook my head. "I doubt if we'll be living there at the end of this year. I can't afford to keep it up on the money I earn."

He was still dazed. "But she promised me fifteen . . ."

I sat down and smiled sadly. "Why does a man marry? I really don't know. I suppose there was some attraction in the beginning." I rubbed my eyes tiredly. "When you were talking about your mother and sisters, Don, I couldn't help thinking of my wife. They all seem to have a lot in common."

He watched me uncertainly.

"Perhaps my wife even looks like one of your sisters, Don. Gladys? Or is it really Doris?"

"I don't . . . Yes. Something like Doris."

"And the voice must be similar? You've noticed my wife's eyes too, haven't you, Don? That imperiousness? Yes, even that touch of madness."

I gave him time to work on it.

He rubbed his mouth nervously. "Yes. I believe I saw it."

I sighed. "She always seems to be giving orders. Something like Doris. Did you notice that, Don? Did she give you an order and expect you to obey it without question? Without some kind of a guarantee, shall we say, that it is necessary or that it might be of benefit to you?"

I wondered whether I should ask him for another of his cigarettes. "We psychiatrists have just as much difficulty in facing our problems as our patients. And sometimes we're powerless to do anything about them at all." I smiled tiredly. "It's been a lonely life for me, Don. Ever since the boy died. He would be twenty-three now."

I looked at my clenched hands. "Sometimes I think that if she'd been just a little kind to him . . ."

There was silence and I knew that he was watching me. The gray at my temples, the line of the jaw.

I looked up. "I admire you a great deal, Don. You've had your problems with your mother and sisters, but you faced them. That took a lot of courage."

When he spoke, his voice was almost child-like. "You don't think that I'm . . . I mean, I'm not really big and strong like some people . . . men . . . I mean my

sisters, and even my mother . . . they said things . . . especially Doris."

I shook my head. "No, Don. You're a man and you have real courage. That's a rare quality."

And now I waited.

After a while he smiled almost shyly. "May I come back again, Doctor?"

"Of course, Don. As a friend."

He rose and his eyes were sparkling. "You can be free, too, Doctor."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not, Don."

But he nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, you can." He smiled secretly. "It'll be a surprise."

At the door he turned and winked. "I'm going to a cocktail party now. I may phone you later . . . with news."

When he was gone I locked the door. It was pure reflex action. There was nothing to worry about now.

I lit a cigar to drive the taste of his cigarettes from my mouth and picked up the sealed envelope on my desk. It contained the renewal lease for my office and I'd signed it two hours ago.

I tore it up and sat back to think about the Trent millions and how many of them would soon be mine.



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